

Kelley snaps state mark in 500 free

Written by Tom Fruehling

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MARSHALLTOWN – Washington’s Cameron Kelley and Nick Saulnier entered Saturday’s state swimming meet seeded first in two individual events each.

Pretty lofty expectations since neither had ever won a state title.

And both would be racing against two super swimmers from Iowa City West who are the among the few Iowa preps (male or female) who have qualified for this summer’s Olympic trials.

But by turning in what their coach called “absolutely awesome” performances, the two Warriors came through under pressure.

In what might be termed mild upsets despite his high seeding, junior Kelley won the 200 yard freestyle, in 1:39.50, and then set a new state record in claiming the grueling 500 freestyle in 4:29.96. His times in both events were fast enough for All-American consideration.

For his part, senior Saulnier nabbed the 100 yard backstroke in 49.54 and came within a smidgen of the state mark himself in 200 yard individual medley while finishing second in 1:49.80.

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Individual medley winner Mark McGlaughlin of Iowa City West swam the event for the first time at the state meet and broke the record by almost three seconds, winning in 1:46.91 . He also won a total of four gold medals at Saturday's meet, was named the outstanding swimmer and now holds the state record of 12 titles in his career.

Saulnier's times earned him automatic All-American status in both events.

Even with the outstanding races by its top two swimmers, Washington slipped a bit from two straight runner-up finishes to come in fourth in the team standings.

With superior depth, Waukee copped its first-ever state championship with 244 points. Iowa City West, winner of the last two state meets, finished second with 210 points. Rounding out the top five were Bettendorf (198.5), Washington (195) and Johnston (182).

"We were hoping to finish higher," admitted veteran Washington Coach Chris Cruise. "We had seven kids swim today, and all of them held or dropped their times. I couldn't be prouder of these kids.

"We just need to build up our numbers next year to bring along more kids that are ready for state."

Despite the slight disappointment overall, Cruise said it didn't overshadow the performances put in by Kelley and Saulnier.

"I couldn't be happier for those two guys. The way they performed today is a testament to all the hard work they've put in. They were absolutely awesome," he said.

Kelley said he wasn't thinking about the top seed in the 200, mostly because he was in the middle lane between senior speedsters Stjepan Fiolic of Johnston and Aidan Keen of Iowa City West. "But I was super nervous," said Kelley, who has relentlessly improved his times over

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three years.

“I didn’t want to fail. I didn’t want to flop. I didn’t want to let everyone down.”

Fiolic and Keen set an unexpectedly fast pace while Kelley stayed back in third place.

“I just followed my plan,” he explained. “I wanted to stay close and wait for my moment in the last half of the race.”

He made his move in the last 50 yards, took the lead after the final turn and barely out-touched the other two. His winning time was almost two seconds under his personal best.

“I’ve been touched out many times in my career,” Kelley said. “I feel happy I wasn’t out-touched today. But to be honest, winning the 200 was a big surprise.”



The longer race suits him better, and in the 500 he and Keen (who came into the meet with eight career gold medals) waged a cat-and-mouse duel from the get-go. Kelley took a slight lead at the halfway point and out-kicked the Iowa City West star to win in record time by a fraction of a second. Keen’s time was 4:30.49. He dropped his personal best by nearly four seconds.

“Again,” Kelley said, “I just stuck to my plan.”

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Saulnier, who will take his talents to the University of Minnesota next year, dropped his best time in the backstroke by almost two seconds in winning his first state title. Sophomore teammate Kaleb Donels finished third.

And in the individual medley Saulnier was almost three seconds faster but still was three seconds slower than McGlaughlin, who was described by Cruise as being a “freakish athletic talent and probably the best swimmer to come along in the last 30 years.”

In gracious defeat, Saulnier agreed.

“It’s an honor to swim next to Mark,” he said. “He’s the most well-rounded swimmer I’ve ever seen. He can swim anything. And he’s really a great guy, too.”

The loss didn’t take away from Saulnier’s own performance.

“I’m super happy,” he noted. “In all four years at state I’ve finished a couple places higher than the year before.

“And today, I had two lifetime bests. You can’t be displeased about lifetime bests.”

Personal best times at Saturday’s championships were also turned in by Kennedy senior Stefan Kitsos, who placed second in the 100 yard breaststroke, and by Jefferson junior Paul Hummell, who finished third in the same event.

“It was a fantastic meet,” said Cruise. “Record times were dropping all over the place.”

Kennedy finished 11th in the team standings. Linn-Mar was 14th and Jefferson placed 15th.

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Kitsos placed fourth in the 50 free and the Cougars finished sixth in the 200 medley relay.

Linn-Mar finished sixth in the 200 freestyle relay and Jefferson was seventh in the 200 medley relay.